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ABSTRACT

The paper delineates elements important in the development of ideal programs for the gifted/talented preschool child. The author emphasizes the following components of an exemplary program: (1) program advocates, (2) staff with expertise in the gifted and early childhood, (3) flexible administrative procedures, (4) well defined program goals and objectives, (5) well defined identification procedures, (6) appropriate curriculum, (7) a nurturing environment, (8) appropriate instructional materials, (9) teacher behavior conducive to learning, (10) parental involvement, (11) ongoing inservice training of staff, and (12) provision for continuity of programing after leaving the preschool. (Author/SBH)

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Rationale for Early Identification and Programming for the Gifted and Components of an Exemplary Program

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Very little research has been conducted with 3, 4, and 5 year old gifted children and there is no research that has addressed the question, "What is the critical age for intervention of gifted children?" Logic tells us, however, that the earlier we identify and appropriately program for the gifted the better the chances are that they will develop their potential to the fullest.

There is a body of knowledge that we can draw upon to support early intervention of gifted children. One strong argument is that the preschool years are important years in an individual's life. It is during these formative years that the child develops the attitudes and habits that have a marked effect upon not only his current functioning, but his functioning in subsequent years as well. During these years the child is most flexible and pliable. Both Hunt (1961) and Bloom (1964) more than 15 years ago recognized the importance of the early years. If gifts and talents are identified and nourished early by the significant adults in the gifted child's life, the chances are these gifts will blossom to their fullest. If the gifts are undetected and/or undernourished, they may never reach fruition or may even "die on the vine."

Another important consideration for early programming for the gifted is that the quality of the parent-child relationship in the early years is so important. If this relationship is not a positive and a nourishing one, it may be difficult or even impossible to change this relationship in later years. The relationship between the parent and child and achievement and

EC 124 137

underachievement has been extensively studied. As Newland says:

> Underachievement often can be corrected or ameliorated by early intervention. . . . But when educational provisions begin only with the sixth grade, or later--as so often is the case--the habits of underachievement have been formed. As with tooth decay, pollution and national inadequacy in reading, the best strategy is prevention. Even with improved effectiveness in prevention, there will be need for some remediation, but that will be greatly reduced. (p. 95)

Despite the fact that a good rationale can be presented for early identification and programming for the gifted, there are few programs at this level. The federal government has funded only four such programs. The Bureau of Education for the Handicapped has funded two model programs for the gifted/talented handicapped, and the Office of the Gifted has funded two, one for the highly intellectually gifted and the other for the gifted/talented handicapped. Only two of these four programs are still in operation. Dr. Bowen will be giving you more specific information about these programs later. Jenkins (1979) made a nationwide survey of early childhood programs for the gifted and located only 5 below kindergarten age. Programs for preschool gifted below age 5 can best be developed in (1) day care programs, (2) Head Start, and (3) private preschool programs. The five-year-old is the major target below grade 1 for gifted/talented programming in the public schools.

The components of an exemplary program for the gifted can be derived from (1) the limited research findings we have on identifying and programming

for young gifted/talented children; (2) opinions of practitioners who have worked with gifted/talented preschoolers; (3) opinions of experts in the field of the gifted; and (4) research and experience working with other groups of young children.

Gathering information from these four sources, Karnes (1980) has delineated some 13 elements which seem to be important in the development of ideal programs for the gifted/talented preschool child. These will not be discussed necessarily in the order of their importance.

First, it appears that any program that is exemplary must have advocates. Certainly, no program will excell without strong supporters. These advocates must be able to relate to legislators to provide the legal framework and financial assistance the program needs. Advocates need to be able to persuade the lay public, parents, administrators, and staff of preschool programs to support a program for the gifted. Advocates may emerge from any group; however, some of the very best advocates are parents of young gifted children.

Epstein (1979) has this to say about the challenge of winning program acceptance:

> Something about the American spirit does not love a smart kid. No one is quite sure why. The athletically gifted and the artistically talented are acceptable, but not the intellectually bright. People react with hostility to the notion of the "egghead." They do not rush out in droves to push for special programs for gifted children. If gifted children are 3% to 5% of the school population, they do not have a large political base. Someone has to take up their banner. . . . (p. 85)

Another component of an exemplary program for young gifted children is trained staff. There should be at least one staff member who is fully trained in both the gifted and early childhood and has the interpersonal skills to interact with a large number of people representing many disciplines, administrators, state personnel and the lay public. Ideally, this person should be employed before launching a program. Through formal training and ongoing inservice training all staff working with the gifted must understand the special needs of these children and be able to program for them in such a way as to meet these needs.

Still another important element of a good preschool program for the gifted is a well-defined identification process. Identification of the young gifted child must be, of course, compatible with the goals of the program. If the program is designed for the child functioning at a very high intellectual level (high I.Q.), then the identification procedures must use an instrument(s) and procedures that tap accelerated mental development.

Since identification of the gifted/talented at ages 3, 4, and 5 is more difficult than at a later age, it is essential that the identification process should be ongoing and children who are thought to be potentially gifted should be given special attention as well as those who demonstrate that they are gifted/talented. There are many who favor Renzulli's (1978) definition of the gifted. He recognizes the diverse nature of the gifted and argues that there are interlocking clusters of behavior found in gifted children. These include above average but not necessarily superior intelligence, task commitment, and creativity. Thus, the identification of the gifted using this definition of giftedness would be much broader than merely seeking the level of a child's intellectual function or determining if he is academically gifted.

It is not enough to have an excellent identification process. Identification is merely a first step. The most important element of the program is to develop a curriculum compatible with the child's stage of development. This curriculum must be of a nature that it challenges the child and motivates him to develop at a rate and in the depth of which he is capable.

The use of a conceptual model seems to be useful in developing an exemplary program. The four conceptual models most frequently used at the preschool level are: (1) Guilford's Structure of the Intellect; (2) Bloom's Taxonomy; (3) the open classroom; and (4) the Enrichment Triad Model. Use of a conceptual model facilitates developing appropriate curriculum for the gifted child. It provides a blueprint that can aid staff in more thoughtfully generating instructional plans.

A fifth component of an exemplary program is use of flexible administration procedures. A young gifted child, for example, may need to be transported across town so that he will be able to work and play with other gifted children functioning at the level he is functioning. Sanderlin (1973) states that "authorities agree that gifted, talented, and creative children are stimulating to each other and should spend a substantial part of their time with their true peers" (p. 163).

Some gifted children may need to be in segregated classes, others need to be given special attention in a resource room; some may function quite well in the mainstream of a preschool class if their special needs can be adequately met in such a setting. There is no research evidence that any of these administrative plans are detrimental to the gifted child.

Programs after school and in the summer may be advantageous to the preschool child. These programs may be partially financed by the school or be financed by fees from the parents, or both school and parents may share the costs.

A sixth set of components for an exemplary program is well-defined goals and objectives as well as appropriate instructional methods. Personnel working with the gifted must be responsive to each gifted child's interests and needs and provide him with the instructional program that will motivate him to work actively toward achieving goals using his creative abilities and persisting to task until the goals are achieved. Personnel working with the gifted must use strategies compatible with the gifted child's style of learning. Independence needs to be encouraged and development of higher level thinking processes as delineated in the conceptual models is a must.

Environment plays an important role in helping the gifted develop fully. Gifted children need to feel that they are appreciated and respected, just as is true of any child. They need to feel that their environment offers the emotional security and support to take risks in solving problems and in pursuing activities of interest to them. Most certainly the gifted child must be encouraged to develop all of the thinking processes and especially divergent thinking, since this is the process so often neglected. Thus, an environment conducive to learning is the seventh component of an exemplary program.

Another important consideration in an exemplary program is to have ample and appropriate instructional materials. Since the range of abilities in a given classroom may be substantial, the teacher must have available to her materials to meet the special interests of children as well as to accommodate a wide range of gifts, talents, and abilities.

The ninth component I would like to mention and possibly the most important of all is the attributes of the teacher. Among those felt to be of utmost importance are that the teacher possess positive attitudes toward the gifted, have the intellectual endowment to work with them, and not be threatened by the gifted child. Newland, in discussing the characteristics of the teacher,

says, "The teacher of the gifted must possess in abundance those characteristics which can be particularly contributive to the learning to be done by the gifted" (p. 147).

The tenth component of an exemplary program that merits stressing is parent involvement. The family and the teacher exert considerable influence on the young child. Some of the major goals of the involvement of the family in a program for their gifted child are: (1) to promote better understanding of their gifted child; (2) to acquire the knowledge and skill to facilitate the development of the child; (3) to learn more appropriate ways of managing the child so that he will grow up to be a happy contributing member of society; and (4) to make full utilization of community resources that have relevance to the growth and development of their gifted child.

There are many valid arguments for family involvement, including the fact that the family is the dominant and most persuasive influence on the young gifted child's life. It is felt that when the school and home work closely together the goals for the child and ways of achieving the goals will be mutually reinforcing and enhancing.

To ensure success of a parent involvement program, two of the critical variables are the expertise of the staff in working with parents and their commitment to involving the parents in the educational program of the child. Also, the designation of some person to coordinate the parent involvement component of the program has been found to be of paramount importance.

To keep abreast of the newest knowledge and to enhance and acquire new or refined skills, personnel working with the gifted must be involved in an ongoing inservice training program. This program must take into account the needs of individual staff members as well as the needs of the entire staff. A needs

assessment must be ongoing and each individual staff member must assist in the assessment of his own needs. To accomplish the goals of the inservice program, a variety of methods are needed.

Last but not least, the thirteenth component of an exemplary program is to make provision for continuity of the program. What happens to the gifted child after he/she leaves the preschool program for the gifted must not be left to chance. Definitive plans must be made to assist the gifted child to make a smooth progression from the preschool program to the next level. Hopefully, the consultant for the gifted will see that a follow-up is made of each gifted child leaving the preschool gifted program and that a continuous challenging program is offered the child. At this point, the parent of the gifted child should be able to serve also as the child's advocate.

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